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THORN TREES — GRAHAM SUTHERLAND (1903-)

THE TOLEDO MUSEUM OF ART
FOUNDED BY EDWARD DRUMMOND LIBBEY

BRITISH PAINTING—A MODERN GALLERY

EXCEPT FOR THE SCULPTOR-DRAFTSMAN HENRY MOORE and the painters Graham Sutherland and Ben Nicholson—men whose creative powers are internationally recognized—present day British artists are little known in this country. Our collection of twentieth century English, Scotch and Irish painting must be unique among American museums. This Coronation spring it is being brought together in a gallery which opened May 31.

Modern British painting may be said to begin with the arrival in London of the American painter, James McNeill Whistler, in 1866. Trained in Paris, and equipped with a genius which a dramatic and aggressive personality was prepared to advance, Whistler initiated the first in the succession of French ideas which have influenced British art for nearly a century. Working with Courbet, Degas, Manet and Monet he had been in intimate contact with the leaders of the radical movement called Naturalism, soon to develop into Impressionism. Before Whistler, the Victorians believed that the literary, anecdotal or moral content of a painting should be of first importance. But for him only the aesthetic qualities—form and color—had real meaning. His British followers, while liberated from sheer illustration, did not go to his extremes; they rarely lost the characteristic English interest in subject matter. Representative of the later English Impressionists was Spencer Gore (1878-1914) whose Mornington Crescent was painted about 1905-10 near the London home of the Camden Town group, a society of artists of which he was the first president.

The cycle of influence and adaptation to local use was seen again after 1910, the year in which the noted critic Roger Fry organized the first British exhibition of Post-Impressionism. The exhibition, including work of Cézanne, Gauguin and Van Gogh, introduced concepts which violently affected subsequent British painting. Three years later, in 1913, New York's controversial Armory Show presented Post-Impressionism to an astounded American public.

Since that time, it has been far less easy to trace a clear pattern in British painting. Certain developments may be picked out, though, and we can briefly examine them in reference to our collection.

The group sometimes termed the New Romantics centers around Graham Sutherland, but his immediate spiritual predecessor was Paul Nash (1889-1946), who became widely known as a painter of both World Wars. Sutherland has worked out to an advanced degree the sense of life which both he and Nash have found in nature. In his view, plants and rocks are possessed with the vitality we normally associate with living creatures. Thorn Trees is one of several paintings on a theme which symbolizes a passionate sense of growth rather than presenting an objective view of a plant he knows.

The elegant abstractions of Ben Nicholson are closer to the aesthetic French tradition, and his rigid economy and architectural precision suggest

DRYING NETS, TREBOUL — CHRISTOPHER WOOD (1901-1930)

his admiration for the Dutch painter Piet Mondrian. Emphasis on line and a delicate color sense are combined with the more strictly formal elements of shape and plane to produce clarity and subtle strength of composition.

Closer to Sutherland than to the pure abstractions of Nicholson is a large group of artists who show great variety in their painting. With most of them color is inseparable from form and space. Ivon Hitchens (1893-) owes a certain debt to the Fauves, but his landscapes and still lifes have a lyrical and emotional character which depends on his skillful use of luminous color areas. John Piper's (1903-) rather melancholy views of remote mountain valleys and gently decaying buildings, painted with rich, somberly glowing pigments, evoke a mysterious and romantic atmosphere which he has employed with great success in several set designs for the theatre and ballet.

Two other artists whose form and color derive from the School of Paris are Patrick Heron (1920-) and Ceri Richards (1903-). Heron's irregular outlines and shrill range of color give vitality and a sense of brilliant light; the sprawling, lush forms of Richards' Music Room partake of a luxurious ease.

Drying Nets, Tréboul, was painted by Christopher Wood in 1930, the year of his death in a train accident. His extraordinarily promising career, cut short at 29, is well represented by this painting. Its ingenuously gay and happy mood conceals subtle structure and great refinement of shape and color.

Is there a "British" quality which is shared by most of these painters? If so, it is a continuation of the lyrical and poetic mood given eloquent expres-

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sion by Constable, Turner and Bonington, three Englishmen to whom late nineteenth century French art owes much for discoveries of how light and color affect human vision. Though much of contemporary art seems international, one can still trace evidences of national flavor in modern British art.

EXHIBITION OF CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN PAINTINGS

The Fortieth Annual Summer Exhibition of Contemporary American Paintings will open on Sunday, June 7, and continue through August 30. Containing about sixty oil paintings, the exhibition will present a lively cross-section of contemporary trends in American painting.

THE ROYAL TOMBS IN WESTMINSTER ABBEY

Photographs showing details of the British Royal Tombs make up an interesting exhibition, opening June 2, and continuing through July 7.

PRINTS FROM THE MUSEUM'S COLLECTION

A selected group of representative prints of various periods and techniques will be shown during the summer months in Galleries 8, 9, 10, 11, and 12.